

The Exploits of Elaine

A Detective Novel and a Motion Picture Drama

By ARTHUR B. REEVE

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SYNOPSIS.

The New York police are mystified by a series of murders and other crimes. The principal clue to the criminal is the warning letter which is sent the victims, signed with a "clutching hand." The latest victim of the mysterious assassin is Taylor Dodge, the insurance president. His daughter, Elaine, employs Craig Kennedy, the famous scientific detective, to try to unravel the mystery. What Kennedy accomplishes is told by his friend Jameson, a newspaper man. Enraged at the determined effort which Elaine and Craig Kennedy are making to put an end to his crimes, the Clutching Hand, as this strange criminal is known, resorts to all sorts of the most diabolical schemes to put them out of the way. Each chapter of the story tells of a new plot against their lives and of the way the great detective uses all his skill to save this pretty girl and himself from death.

TENTH EPISODE

THE LIFE CURRENT.

Assignments were being given out on the Star one afternoon, and I was standing talking with several other reporters, in the busy hum of type-writers and clicking telegraphs.

"What do you think of that?" asked one of the fellows. "You're something of a scientific detective, aren't you?" Without laying claim to such a distinction, I took the paper and read:

THE POISONED KISS AGAIN.

Three More New York Women Report Being Kissed by Mysterious Stranger—Later Fell Into Deep Unconsciousness—What Is It?

I had scarcely finished when one of the copy boys, dashing past me, called out: "You're wanted on the wire, Mr. Jameson."

I hurried over to the telephone and answered.

A musical voice responded to my hurried hello, and I hastened to adopt my most polite tone.

"Is this Mr. Jameson?" asked the voice.

"Yes," I replied, not recognizing it. "Well, Mr. Jameson, I've heard of you on the Star, and I've just had a very strange experience. I've had the poisoned kiss."

The woman did not pause to catch my exclamation of astonishment, but went on: "It was like this. A man ran up to me on the street and kissed me—and I don't know how it was—but I became unconscious—and I didn't come to for an hour—in a hospital—fortunately. I don't know what would have happened if it hadn't been that someone came to my assistance and the man fled. I thought the Star would be interested."

"We are," I hastened to reply. "Will you give me your name?"

"Why, I am Mrs. Florence Leigh of No. 20 Prospect avenue," returned the voice.

"Say," I exclaimed hurrying over to the editor's desk, "here's another woman on the wire who says she has received the poisoned kiss."

"Suppose you take that assignment," the editor answered, sensing a possible story.

I took it with alacrity, figuring out the quickest way by elevated and surface to reach the address.

I must say that I could scarcely criticize the poisoned kiss's taste, for the woman who opened the door certainly was extraordinarily attractive.

"And you really were—put out by a kiss?" I queried, as she led me into a neat sitting room.

"Absolutely—as much as it had been by one of those poisoned needles you read about," she replied confidently, hastening on to describe the affair volubly.

It was beyond me.

"May I use your telephone?" I asked.

"Surely," she answered.

I called the laboratory. "Is that you, Craig?" I inquired.

"Yes, Walter," he answered, recognizing my voice.

"Say, Craig," I asked breathlessly, "what sort of kiss would suffocate a person?"

My only answer was an uproarious laugh from him at the idea.

"I know," I persisted, "but I've got the assignment from the Star—and I'm out here interviewing a woman about it. It's all right to laugh—but here I am. I've found a case—names, dates and places. I wish you'd explain the thing, then."

"Oh, all right, Walter," he replied indulgently. "I'll meet you as soon as I can and help you out."

We waited patiently.

The bell rang and the woman hastened to the door, admitting Kennedy.

"Hello, Walter," he greeted.

"This is certainly a most remarkable case, Craig," I said, introducing him, and telling briefly what I had learned.

"And you actually mean to say that a kiss had the effect—"

Just then the telephone interrupted.

"Yes," she reassured quickly. "Excuse me a second."

order to get another. I'll have to go. I'll get this story from you, Craig."

The day before, in the suburban house, the Clutching Hand had been talking to two of his emissaries, an attractive young woman and a man.

They were Flirty Florrie and Dan the Dude.

"Now, I want you to get Kennedy," he said. "The way to do it is to separate Kennedy and Elaine—see?"

"All right, Chief, we'll do it," they replied.

Clutching Hand had scarcely left when Flirty Florrie began by getting published in the papers the story which I had seen.

The next day she called me up from the suburban house. Having got me to promise to see her, she had scarcely turned from the telephone when Dan the Dude walked in from the next room.

"He's coming," she said.

Dan was carrying a huge stag head with a beautifully branched pair of antlers. Under his arm was a coil of wire which he had connected to the inside of the head.

"Fine!" he exclaimed. Then, pointing to the head, he added, "It's all ready. See how I fixed it? That ought to please the Chief."

Dan moved quickly to the mantel and mounted a stepladder there by which he had taken down the head, and started to replace the head above the mantel.

He hooked the head on a nail.

"There," he said, unscrewing one of the beautiful brown glass eyes of the stag.

Back of it could be seen a camera shutter.

"One of those new quick shutter cameras," he explained.

Then he ran a couple of wires along the molding around the room and into a closet, where he made the connection with a sort of switchboard on which a button was marked, "SHUTTER" and the switch, "WIND FILM."

"Now, Flirty," he said, coming out of the closet and pulling up the shade which let a flood of sunlight into the room, "you see, I want you to stand here—then, do your little trick."

Just then the bell rang.

"That must be Jameson," she cried. "Now—get to your corner."

With a last look Dan went into the closet and shut the door.

Perhaps half an hour later Clutching Hand himself called me up on the telephone. It was he—not the Star—as I learned only too late.

I had scarcely got out of the house, as Craig told me afterwards, when Flirty Florrie told all over again the embroidered tale that had caught my ear.

Kennedy said nothing, but listened intently, perhaps betraying in his face the skepticism he felt.

"You see," she said, still voluble and eager to convince him, "I was only walking on the street. Here—let me show you. It was just like this."

She took his arm and, before he knew it, led him to the spot on the floor near the window which Dan had indicated. Meanwhile Dan was listening attentively in his closet.

"Now—stand there. You are just as I was—only I didn't expect anything."

She was pantomiming some one approaching stealthily while Kennedy watched her with interest, tinged with doubt. Behind Craig in his closet, Dan was reaching for the switchboard button.

"You see," she said advancing quickly and acting her words, "he placed his hands on my shoulders—so—then threw his arms about my neck—so!"

She said no more, but imprinted a deep, passionate kiss on Kennedy's mouth, clinging closely to him. Before Kennedy could draw away, Dan in the closet, had pressed the button and the switch several times in rapid succession.

"Th—that's very realistic," gasped Craig, a good deal taken aback by the sudden osculatory assault.

He frowned.

"I—I'll look into the case," he said, backing away. "There—there may be some scientific explanation—but—er—"

He was plainly embarrassed and hastened to make his adieu.

How little impression the thing made on Kennedy can be easily seen from the fact that on the way downtown that afternoon he stopped at Martin's, on Fifth avenue, and bought a ring—a very handsome solitaire, the finest Martin had in the shop.

It must have been about the time that he decided to stop at Martin's that the Dodge butler, Jennings, admitted a young lady who presented a card on which was engraved the name

Miss Florence Leigh,
20 Prospect Avenue.

As he handed Elaine the card, she looked up from the book she was reading and took it.

"All right, show her in, Jennings. I'll see her."

Elaine moved into the drawing room, Jennings springing forward to part the portieres for her and passing through the room quickly where Flirty Florrie sat waiting. Flirty Florrie rose and stood gazing at Elaine, apparently very much embarrassed, even after Jennings had gone.

"It is embarrassing," she said finally, "but, Miss Dodge, I have come to you to beg for my love."

Elaine looked at her nonplused.

"Yes," she continued, "you do not know it, but Craig Kennedy is infatuated with you." She paused again, then added, "But he is engaged to me."

Elaine stared at the woman. She was dazed. She could not believe it. "There is the ring," Flirty Florrie added, indicating a very impressive paste diamond.

Quickly she reached into her bag and drew out two photographs, without a word, handing them to Elaine.

"There's the proof," Flirty said simply, choking a sob.

Elaine looked with a start. Sure enough, there was the neat living room in the house on Prospect avenue. In one picture Florrie had her arms over Kennedy's shoulders. In the other, apparently, they were passionately kissing.

Elaine slowly laid the photographs on the table.

"Please—please, Miss Dodge—give me back my lost love. You are rich and beautiful—I am poor. I have only my good looks. But—I—I love him—and he—loves me—and has promised to marry me."

Florrie had broken down completely and was weeping softly into a lace handkerchief.

She moved toward the door. Elaine followed her.

"Jennings—please see the lady to the door."

Back in the drawing-room, Elaine seized the photographs and hurried into the library where she could be alone.

Just then she heard the bell and Kennedy's voice in the hall.

"How are you this afternoon," Kennedy greeted Elaine gayly.

Elaine had been too overcome by what had just happened to throw it off so easily, and received him with studied coolness.

Still, Craig, manlike, did not notice it at once. In fact, he was too busy gazing about to see that neither Jennings, Marie nor the duenna Aunt Josephine were visible. They were not and he quickly took the ring from his pocket. Without waiting, he showed it to Elaine.

Elaine very coolly admired the ring, as Craig might have eyed a specimen on a microscope slide. Still, he did not notice.

He took the ring, about to put it on her finger. Elaine drew away. Concealment was not in her frank nature.

She picked up the two photographs. "What have you to say about those?" she asked cuttingly.

Kennedy, quite surprised, took them and looked at them. Then he let them fall carelessly on the table and dropped into a chair, his head back in a burst of laughter.

"Why—that was what they put over on Walter," he said. "He called me up early this afternoon—told me he had discovered one of those poisoned kiss cases you have read about in the papers. Think of it—all that to pull a concealed camera! Such an elaborate business—just to get me where they could take this thing. I suppose they've put someone up to saying she's engaged!"

Elaine was not so lightly affected. "But," she said severely, repressing her emotion, "I don't understand, Mr. Kennedy, how scientific inquiry into the poisoned kiss could necessitate this sort of thing."

She pointed at the photographs accusingly.

"But," he began, trying to explain. "No buts," she interrupted.

"Then you believe that I—"

"How can you, as a scientist, ask me to doubt the camera?" she inquired, very coldly turning away.

Kennedy rapidly began to see that it was far more serious than he had at first thought.

"Very well," he said with a touch of impatience, "if my word is not to be taken—I'll—"

He had seized his hat and stick. Elaine did not deign to answer.

Then, without a word, he stalked out of the door.

Kennedy was moping in the laboratory the next day when I came in.

"Say, Craig," I began, trying to overcome his fit of blues.

Kennedy, filled with his own thoughts, paid no attention to me. Then he jumped up.

"By George—I will," he muttered. I poked my head out of the door in time to see him grab up his hat and coat and dash from the room, putting his coat on as he went.

"He's a nut today," I exclaimed to myself.

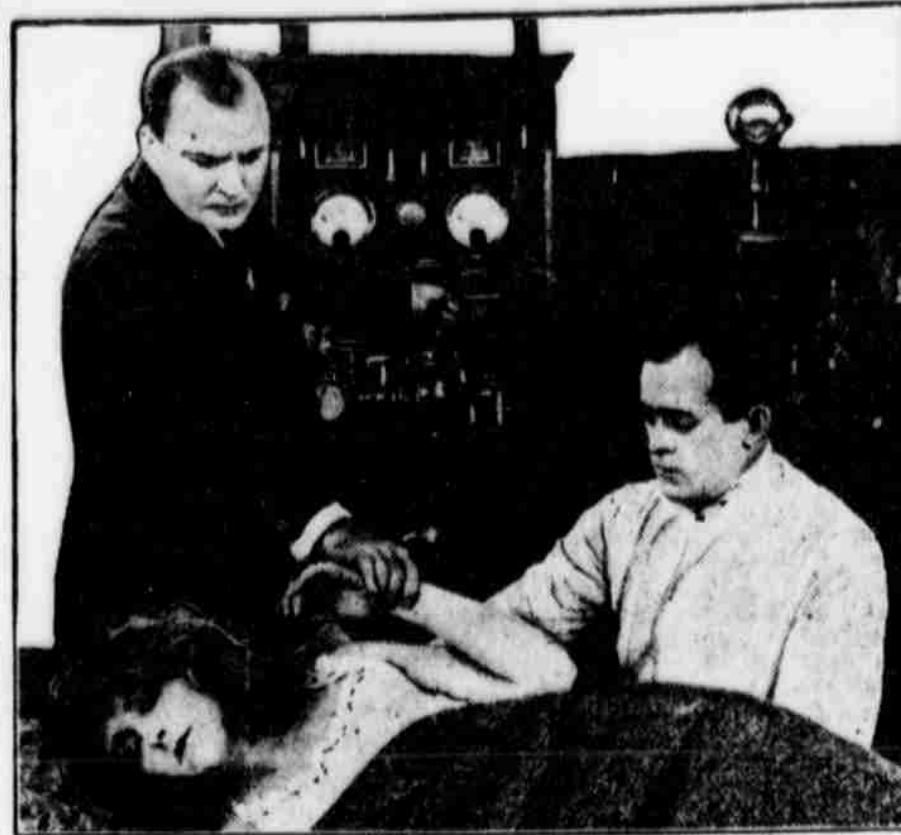
Though I did not know yet of the quarrel, Kennedy had really struggled with himself until he was willing to put his pride in his pocket and had made up his mind to call on Elaine again.

As he entered he saw that it was really of no use, for only Aunt Josephine was in the library.

"Oh, Mr. Kennedy," she said innocently enough, "I'm so sorry she isn't here. There's been something troubling her, and she won't tell me what it is. But she's gone to call on a young woman, a Florence Leigh, I think."

"Florence Leigh!" exclaimed Craig with a start and a frown. "Let me use your telephone."

I had turned my attention in the laboratory to a story I was writing,



As Craig Kennedy Turns on the Current Elaine's Chest Slowly Begins to Rise and Fall.

when I heard the telephone ring. It was Craig. Without a word of apology for his rudeness, which I knew had been purely absent-minded, I heard him say: "Walter, meet me in half an hour outside that Florence Leigh's house."

Half an hour later I was waiting near the house in the suburbs to which I had been directed by the strange telephone call the day before. I noticed that it was apparently deserted. The blinds were closed and a "To Let" sign was on the side of the house.

"Hello, Walter," cried Craig at last, bustling along.

He led the way around the side of the house to a window, and, with a powerful grasp, wrenched open the closed shutters. He had just smashed the window when a policeman appeared.

"Hey, you fellows—what are you doing there?" he shouted.

Craig paused a second, then pulled his card from his pocket.

"Just the man I want," he parried, much to the policeman's surprise. "There's something crooked going on here. Follow us in."

We climbed into the window. There was the same living room we had seen the day before. But it was now bare and deserted.

"Come on," cried Kennedy, beckoning us on.

Quickly he rushed through the house. There was not a thing in it to change the deserted appearance of the first floor. At last it occurred to Craig to grope his way down cellar. There was nothing there.

Kennedy had been carefully going over the place, and was at the other side of the cellar from ourselves when I saw him stop and gaze at the floor.

"Hide," he whispered suddenly to us.

We waited a moment. Nothing happened. Had he been seeing things or hearing things, I wondered?

From our hidden vantage we could now see a square piece in the floor, perhaps five feet in diameter, slowly open up as though on a pivot.

The weird and sinister figure of a man appeared. Over his head he wore a peculiar helmet with hideous glass pieces over the eyes and tubes that connected with a tank which he carried buckled to his back.

Quickly he closed down the cover of the tube, but not before a vile effluvia seemed to escape, and penetrate even to us in our hiding places. As he moved forward, Kennedy gave a flying leap at him, and we followed with a regular football interference.

It was the work of only a moment for us to subdue and hold him, while Craig ripped off the helmet.

It was Dan the Dude.

"What's that thing?" I puffed, as I helped Craig with the headgear.

"An oxygen helmet," he replied. "There must be air down the tube that cannot be breathed."

He went over to the tube. Carefully he opened the top and gazed down, starting back a second later, with his face puckered up at the noxious odor.

"Sewer gas," he ejaculated, as he slammed the cover down. Then he added to the policeman: "Where do you suppose it comes from?"

"Why," replied the officer, "the St. James viaduct—an old sewer—is somewhere about these parts."

Kennedy puckered his face as he gazed at our prisoner. He reached down quickly and lifted something off the man's coat.

"Golden hair," he muttered.

"Elaine's!"

A moment later he seized the man and shook him roughly.

"Where is she—tell me?" he demanded.

The man snarled some kind of a reply, refusing to say a word about her. "Tell me," repeated Kennedy.

"Humph!" snorted the prisoner, more close-mouthed than ever.

Kennedy was furious. As he sent the man reeling away from him he seized the oxygen helmet and began putting it on. There was only one thing to do—to follow the clue of the golden strands of hair.

Down into the pest hole he went, his head protected by the oxygen helmet. As he cautiously took one step after another down a series of iron rungs inside the hole, he found that the water was up to his chest. At the bottom of the perpendicular pit was a narrow, low passageway leading off.

It was just about big enough to get through, but he managed to grope along it.

The minutes passed as the policeman and I watched our prisoner in the cellar by the tube. I looked anxiously at my watch.

"Craig!" I shouted at last, unable to control my fears for him.

No answer.

By this time Craig had come to a small, open chamber, into which the viaduct widened. On the wall he found another series of iron rungs, up which he climbed. The gas was terrible.

As he neared the top of the ladder he came to a shelf-like aperture in the sewer chamber, and gazed about. It was horribly dark. He reached out and felt a piece of cloth. Anxiously he pulled on it. Then he reached further into the darkness.

There was Elaine, unconscious, apparently dead.

In desperation Craig carried her down the ladder.

With our prisoner we could only look helplessly around.

"By George, I'm going down after him," I cried in desperation.

"Don't do it," advised the policeman. "You'll never get out."

One whiff of the horrible gas told me that he was right.

"Listen," said the policeman.

There was, indeed, a faint noise from the black depths below us. A rope alongside the rough ladder began to move, as though some one was pulling it taut. He gazed down.

"Craig! Craig!" I called. "Is that you?"

No answer. But the rope still moved. Perhaps the helmet made it impossible for him to hear.

He had struggled back in the swirling current almost exhausted by his helpless burden. Holding Elaine's head above the surface of the water and pulling on the rope to attract my attention, he could neither hear nor shout. He had taken a turn of the rope about Elaine. I tried pulling on it. There was something heavy on the other end, and I kept on pulling.

At last I could make out Kennedy dimly mounting the ladder. The weight was the unconscious body of Elaine which he steadied as he mounted the ladder. I tugged harder and he slowly came up.

Together, at last, the policeman and I reached down and pulled them out.

We placed Elaine on the cellar floor, as comfortably as was possible, and the policeman began his first aid motions for resuscitation.

"No—no!" cried Kennedy. "Not here—take her up where the air is fresher."

With his revolver still drawn to overawe the prisoner, the policeman forced him to aid us in carrying her up the rickety flight of cellar steps. Kennedy followed quickly, unscrewing the oxygen helmet as he went.

In the deserted living room we deposited our senseless burden, while Kennedy, the helmet off now, bent over her.

"Quick—quick!" he cried to the officer. "An ambulance!"

"But the prisoner," the policeman indicated.

"Hurry—hurry; I'll take care of him," urged Craig, seizing the policeman's pistol and thrusting it into his pocket. "Walter, help me."

He was trying the ordinary methods of resuscitation. Meanwhile the officer had hurried out, seeking the nearest telephone, while we worked madly to bring Elaine back.

Again and again Kennedy bent and outstretched her arms, trying to induce respiration again. So busy was I that for the moment I forgot our prisoner.

But Dan had seen his chance. Noiselessly he picked up the old chair in the room and with it raised was approaching Kennedy to knock him out.

Before I knew it myself Kennedy had heard him. With a half instinctive motion he drew the revolver from his pocket and, almost before I could see it, had shot the man. Without a word he returned the gun to his pocket and again bent over Elaine, without so much as a look at the crook, who sank to the floor, dropping the chair from his nerveless hands.

Already the policeman had got an ambulance, which was now tearing along to us.

Frankly Kennedy was working. A moment he paused and looked at me—hopeless.

Just then, outside, we could hear the ambulance, and a doctor and two

attendants hurried up to the door. Without a word the doctor seemed to appreciate the gravity of the case.

He finished his examination and shook his head.

"There is no hope—no hope," he said slowly.

Kennedy merely stared at him. But the rest of us instinctively removed our hats.

Kennedy gazed at Elaine, overcome. Was this the end?

It was not many minutes later that Kennedy had Elaine in the little sitting room off the laboratory, having taken her there in the ambulance, with the doctor and two attendants.

Elaine's body had been placed on a couch, covered by a blanket, and the shades were drawn. The light fell on her pale face.

There was something incongruous about death and the vast collection of scientific apparatus, a ghastly mockery of humanity. How futile was it all in the presence of the great destroyer!

Aunt Josephine had arrived, stunned, and a moment later Perry Bennett. As I looked at the sorrowful party Aunt Josephine rose slowly from her position on her knees, where she had been weeping silently beside Elaine, and pressed her hands over her eyes, with every indication of faintness.

Before any of us could do anything, she had staggered into the laboratory itself. Bennett and I followed quickly. There I was busy for some time getting restoratives.

Meanwhile Kennedy, beside the couch, with an air of desperate determination, turned